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Forum: Universal Basic Income

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## Naturally Radical? A Response to Kimberly Klinger's "Species-Beings in Crisis: UBI and the Nature of Work"

John Carl Baker

**ABSTRACT** In this response to Kimberly Klinger's "Species-Being in Crisis: UBI and the Nature of Work," John Carl Baker ties Klinger's analysis to past Marxist debates about human nature and contemporary appeals to human nature by a resurgent US left. While sympathetic to the idea that UBI speaks to a human desire for free productive activity, he critiques the notion that UBI necessarily illuminates the exploitative wage relations of capitalism. Baker proposes that regardless of the validity of Marxist conceptions of human nature, it is the materialist analysis of social relations that must take primacy in any examination of UBI or similar left policy prescriptions.

[Kimberly Klinger has drawn an astute connection in "Species-Beings in Crisis: UBI and the Nature of Work."](#) She suggests that rising interest in a Universal Basic Income (UBI) stems not only from the structural deficiencies of late capitalism in the Global North, but from a deeper wish for unalienated life—a chance to unlink the means of reproduction from the coerced selling of labor that defines a worker's existence in a capitalist economy. As Klinger describes it, this wish is as much cultural as it is economic, in that it is grounded in an impulse to commune with an elemental part of human existence that has been debased—exploited—under capitalism. In Marx's formulation, the human capacity for "free, conscious activity"—the ability to conceive a project and will it into existence—marks one of our defining traits as a species, as does sociality.<sup>1</sup> In concert, these traits form the basis for human productivity through social labor, which offers both the promise of socialism and the tyranny of capitalism, in which this capacity is appropriated to enrich the property-owning class. Under capitalism, workers must labor to acquire wages so they can purchase the means of reproduction and survive to continue laboring for another day. UBI seems to offer a way out of this cycle by providing cash for necessities and thereby granting the worker more control over their existence, returning them to some semblance of a true and free self.

Klinger proposes, then, that understanding the appeal of UBI requires grappling with Marxist conceptions of human nature. Althusser very famously rejected such notions entirely, arguing that Marx transcended his earlier humanism (from whence the concept of "species-being" originates) as part of his epistemological break. In Althusser's telling, Marx "broke radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man," with 1845 (and the sixth thesis on Feuerbach) marking the point at which he began the transition to philosophical maturity.<sup>2</sup> Althusser's work was taken up and expanded to such a degree by other theorists that Norman Geras was moved to write a succinct but fairly definitive critique of his provocative claim. Geras's *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* established that contra Althusser, the mature Marx certainly believed in and utilized a concept of human nature. Geras went further, though, arguing in

the book's final chapter that a notion of human nature is pivotal to the Marxist project. In addition to our sociality and capacity for conscious production, he notes, human beings also have basic biological needs that capitalism does not meet—a grave injustice. Without an accounting of our shared human traits, Geras contends, the Marxist case for radical social change loses much of its compelling thrust.<sup>3</sup>

Geras's critique of Althusser was published in 1983, but defenses of human nature are again popping up on the left—a phenomenon that, like interest in UBI, seems to have revived in the wake of the Great Recession. Terry Eagleton, with direct reference to Geras, included a left defense of human nature into his 2011 work *Why Marx Was Right*.<sup>4</sup> *Jacobin* editor-in-chief Bhaskar Sunkara included a celebratory entry on human nature (coauthored with Adaner Usmani) in the 2016 collection *The ABCs of Socialism*,<sup>5</sup> and in 2017 the magazine published a transcript of a talk by Usmani entitled “Why Socialists Should Believe in Human Nature.”<sup>6</sup> While these arguments vary in approach, they appeal in part to the same conception of human capacity that UBI seems to address. As Sunkara writes, for example: “Our outrage that individuals are denied the right to live free and full lives is anchored in the idea that people are inherently creative and curious, and that capitalism too often stifles these qualities.”<sup>7</sup> UBI, for some, constitutes a partial solution to this injustice. In theory, it provides a safe harbor from commodification—an opportunity for workers to be creative *for themselves* and partake of the realm of freedom that is time liberated from wage work.

It would be too strong to characterize this renewed mobilization of human nature as a resurgent Marxist humanism. But it does seem to be part of a general shift away from the perceived detachment of academic Marxism (of which Althusserianism is a convenient and at times understandable target) and toward a still inchoate but much more politicized “democratic socialism.” This tendency, associated with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Socialists of America, and the insurgent left-wing of the Democratic Party, is self-consciously grounded in meeting basic human needs (such as healthcare and housing) and, if possible, decommodifying these essentials entirely. There is an undeniable energy behind this new wave of leftism, whose concrete goals—like Medicare for All—seek to rectify the liberal retreat from providing universal social programs for working class people. But while democratic socialism may be less than revolutionary Marxism, it is potentially more than social democracy, and to its credit refuses to let a kinder, gentler capitalism be the horizon of the possible. In democratic socialist strategy, Medicare for All isn't just palliative, but subversive. It gives recipients a glimpse of freedom from want—and a sense that another world truly is possible. In satisfying one of humankind's essential needs, in other words, it opens up a world of political and cultural possibility.<sup>8</sup>

Among democratic socialists and the broader left, UBI has never garnered the near-universal support given to Medicare for All. But proponents, such as Kathi Weeks, similarly argue that it possesses subversive as well as palliative attributes.<sup>9</sup> Klinger echoes these arguments when she writes that UBI's “greatest strength” is how it “exposes” capital's exploitation of a fundamental human characteristic, debasing our collective capacity for production and shunting us into a consumptive cycle with mere reproduction of existence as our goal. Such exposure is certainly possible, but given the many business-friendly advocates of UBI and the concept's substantial right-wing genealogy, it seems preliminary to attribute this kind of veil-lifting to the policy itself. One can certainly imagine a left program that explicitly utilized the concept to draw attention to the tyranny of wage work under capitalism, but more often, left advocates for UBI have mobilized existing theory, Marxist and otherwise, to argue for the concept's radicalism. Appeals to human nature, while often implicit, are rarely far from the surface of this

approach. Klinger's analysis, despite a commendably critical lens, seems less attentive to the idealism at the heart of such assertions.





Early in the article, Klinger uses the word "desire" to describe the human impulse to engage in conscious and free labor. If, following Geras, we accept that this forms a component of human nature—and that human nature actually exists—we are well on our way to explaining the appeal as well as the ambivalence of UBI. As a concept, UBI is compelling because it promises to break the cycle of alienated labor. But for this reason, UBI is also rather insidious. It appeals to a collective human desire that may not be met, even in part, by an actually-existing UBI. There are, for instance, right-wing and left-wing forms of UBI—as well as significant variation within each of these categories. One form of UBI might barely satisfy basic needs while subsidizing employers' low wages and justifying cuts to existing social programs. Another might be luxuriously comprehensive and supplemented by additional social provisions. These are radically different visions of a nominally singular concept. The dream of unalienated life could cause some to endorse policies that will lead to new forms of alienation and exploitation.

Klinger has thus provided an illuminating explanation of UBI's *seductiveness*. But regardless of any primal origins, it is social relations and history, including the history of the present, that determine how such a desire is taken up and for what political ends. This is why historical materialism, not conceptions of human nature (even Marxist ones), must play a dominant role in our assessment of UBI. Klinger works from this understanding, ending on an ambivalent note with reference to longshot presidential candidate and UBI advocate Andrew Yang. Yang, whose automation doomsaying and fetish for entrepreneurship marks him as an avatar for Silicon Valley capitalism, clearly demonstrates the need to assess specific UBI proposals in terms of the wider social formation they inhabit. With capital increasingly adopting UBI as part of its own platform for structural renewal, there is a significant risk the concept will be instrumentalized for regressive or even outright reactionary ends. Any program like UBI that focuses on individual satisfaction and advancement instead of collective benefit will be prone to such appropriation. Without a radical shift in social relations, UBI could produce greater atomization even as it claims to address—and theoretically *does* address—a common human desire. The new "democratic socialism" has so far resisted this pitfall by keeping UBI at arm's length, emphasizing collective material needs via policies like Medicare for All and maintaining a future-oriented focus on supplanting, rather than amending, capitalism. But it remains to be seen whether the mobilization of human nature will continue to work in support of, and not against, the pursuit of socialism. There may be a place for human nature on the left, but as the case of UBI shows, conceptual appeal is simply no substitute for a stark examination of the complex play of relations in today's social totality.

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## Notes

1. Robert C. Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 75–79. See also Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), 283–287. [↗](#)
2. Louis Althusser, "Marxism and Humanism," *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005), 227. [↗](#)
3. Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London: Verso, 2006), 90–116. [↗](#)
4. Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 79–100. [↗](#)
5. Adaner Usmani and Bhaskar Sunkara, "Socialism Sounds Good in Theory, But Doesn't Human Nature Make It Impossible to Realize?" *The ABCs of Socialism*, ed.

6. Adaner Usmani, “Why Socialists Should Believe in Human Nature,” *Jacobin*, April 12, 2017, <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/04/human-nature-socialism-capitalism-greed-morality-needs>. 
7. Usmani and Sunkara, “Socialism Sounds Good in Theory,” 32. 
8. Meagan Day, “Democratic Socialism, Explained by a Democratic Socialist,” *Vox*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2018/8/1/17637028/bernie-sanders-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-cynthia-nixon-democratic-socialism-jacobin-dsa>. 
9. See, for instance, Katie Cruz, “A Feminist Case for Basic Income: An Interview With Kathi Weeks,” *Critical Legal Thinking*, August 22, 2016, <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2016/08/22/feminist-case-basic-income-interview-kathi-weeks/>. 

 **Bio**

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John Carl Baker holds a PhD in cultural studies from George Mason University. His works of commentary and analysis on nuclear weapons issues have appeared in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, *Jacobin*, *New Republic*, and other publications. The views expressed here are his own and not those of his employer.

